

12/21/21 Tuesday

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FDA Approves Bimonthly HIV Prevention Shot More Effective Than Existing PrEP Medications  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) federal regulatory agency has approved Apretude as the nation's first injectable pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication that prevents infection from Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

"Today's approval adds an important tool in the effort to end the HIV epidemic by providing the first option to prevent HIV that does not involve taking a daily pill," Dr. Debra Birnkrant, director of the Division of Antivirals in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, said in a [Tuesday news release](#).

"This injection, given every two months, will be critical to addressing the HIV epidemic in the US, including helping high-risk individuals and certain groups where adherence to daily medication has been a major challenge or not a realistic option," she added.

Apretude is available for at-risk adults and adolescents who weigh at least 77 pounds and have tested negative for HIV immediately before beginning treatment.

The drug requires two initiation treatments administered one month apart before patients can move to the every-other-month regimen. It is an extended-release injectable suspension of cabotegravir, which under the brand name Cabenuva was [approved by the FDA](#) as a PrEP treatment in January. However, Cabenuva has to be administered every month.

According to [a separate release](#) by British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), two trials held in 13 countries found Apretude was more effective at preventing HIV infection than the existing PrEP medication Truvada.

One study, which included more than 4,500 cisgender men and transgender women who have sex with men, found they were 69% less likely to get HIV than those who took Truvada. Another, involving 3,200 cisgender women at risk of getting HIV, found they had a 90% smaller chance of getting HIV than those on Truvada.

If left untreated, HIV can develop into Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a disease that undermines the body's immune system, enabling typically non-threatening illnesses to become deadly.

Apretude is made by ViiV Healthcare, a joint venture between GSK and Pfizer, with GSK owning a majority stake in the company. GSK, in turn, was formed in 2000 by SmithKline's merger with Glaxo Wellcome, itself the product of a merger between Glaxo and Burroughs Wellcome a few years earlier.

In 1989, Burroughs Wellcome aroused fury in the LGBTQ community by arbitrarily hiking the price on Retrovir, an antiretroviral medication better known as AZT that at the time was the only available treatment for AIDS, up to \$10,000 per year, making it at the time the most expensive drug ever sold. [Protests by the activist](#) group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) at the

corporation's offices and the New York Stock Exchange brought global attention to the issue and pressured Burroughs Wellcome to [modestly cut its price](#) to \$6,500 per year.

At the time, the New York Times reported the company was making up to \$100 million in profit each year on sale of the drug.

The issue of outlandishly high pricing for HIV/AIDS treatments has continued, however, and the highly effective protease inhibitor drugs developed in the mid-1990s still cost \$10,000 to \$15,000 [per year in 2000](#). Similarly, after the FDA approved the first PrEP drug, Gilead's Truvada, in 2012, the company's monopoly allowed them to [rake in \\$2,000 per month](#) from patients, or \$24,000 per year.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [won a lawsuit](#) against Gilead last year, arguing the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) holds the patent for Truvada and a related PrEP drug, Descovy, since they were developed from publicly-funded HIV research.

According to the FDA, just 25% of the 1.2 million Americans for whom PrEP is recommended had actually been prescribed it - a deficit credited largely to the drug's incredible cost.

By contrast, [Cuba began giving](#) at-risk LGBTQ Cubans PrEP treatments free of charge in 2019.

Access to HIV drugs is even more difficult in Africa, where two-thirds of people living with HIV are, thanks to the World Trade Organization's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS) rules that bar production of cheaper, generic versions of drugs in the Third World.

According to the World Health Organization's [report on World AIDS Day](#) on December 1, some 1.5 million people were newly infected with HIV in 2020 and 680,000 people died from HIV-related causes. Worldwide, 37.7 million people are living with HIV, 73% of whom are receiving lifelong antiretroviral therapy.

The Joint United Nations Program on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) has set a goal for 2030 [known as "95-95-95"](#): 95% of people with HIV know their status; 95% of people with HIV are receiving treatment; and 95% of people receiving treatment are achieving viral suppression using PrEP.

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IDF's Former Intel Chief Hayman Admits Israel Was Involved in Soleimani's Assassination  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

In a recent interview, a former leading Israel Defense Force (IDF) official admitted for the first time that Israel played a role in the assassination of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani in Iraq, which was carried out by a US drone.

In the early morning hours of January 3, 2020, an SUV and a minivan were driving away from the tarmac at Baghdad International Airport carrying a number of dignitaries, including Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Shiita militia Kata'ib Hezbollah and deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). However, the cars were being stalked by an MQ-9 Reaper drone owned by the US Air Force, which moments later fired a Hellfire R9X missile, destroying the SUV and killing both men.



Soleimani, commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, was [on his way to meet](#) with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to lay the groundwork for reconciliation talks with Iran's great rival in the region, Saudi Arabia. The general commanded widespread respect in the region for his role in taking down Daesh\* in Iraq and Syria, a role in which he developed a close relationship with Iraq's PMF, but which the Trump administration claimed was used to direct those militias into working as proxy forces to attack US soldiers in the region.

Just days after the strike, [NBC reported](#) that Israeli intelligence had participated in the operation, tipping off the Americans about Soleimani's airplane leaving Damascus airport in Syria for Baghdad. Last week, Donald Trump, who was US president at the time of the airstrike, griped in [an Axios interview](#) that he had felt pressured by Jerusalem to take the initiative on the operation. However, the admission of participation by Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman, former chief of the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate, in a recent interview with Israeli media, is a first by an Israeli official.

"Assassinating Soleimani was an achievement, since our main enemy, in my eyes, are the Iranians," Hayman said in the [Kislev issue](#) of Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center's quarterly journal Mabat MLM, published in November.

Hayman noted there had been "two significant and important assassinations during my term," which ended in October.

"The first, as I've already recalled, is that of Qassem Soleimani - it's rare to locate someone so senior, who is the architect of the fighting force, the strategist and the operator - it's rare," he said. He called the Iranian commander "the engine of the train of Iranian entrenchment" in Syria, where Israel has carried out airstrikes for years against what targets it claims are Iranian facilities preparing to attack Israel.

Hayman added that those strikes have been successful in "preventing the attempt by Iran to put down roots in Syria."

Israel has claimed the right to attack Iran in other ways, as well, including a [series of espionage](#) operations against the country's nuclear program, which Israel claims aims at building a nuclear weapon to attack them with. These have included sabotage, as well as assassinations like the killing of [Mohsen Fakhrizadeh](#), a top Iranian nuclear scientist, in November 2020.

Tehran has repeatedly rejected claims that it pursues a nuclear weapon, which the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [ruled in 2009](#) is a violation of Islam's moral strictures. Instead, Iran says it wants to use the refined uranium to fuel power plants and for use in medical research facilities, but has increased the quality and quantity of uranium it's producing in order to pressure the United States to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA nuclear deal](#)) that it unilaterally withdrew from in 2018, reimposing crushing economic sanctions against Iran.

Indeed, Hayman [admitted in October](#) that while Iran had produced large amounts of highly refined uranium, "in all other aspects of the Iranian nuclear project, we see no progress - not in the weapons project, in the financial area, not in any other sector."

"To the best of our knowledge, the directive has not changed and they are not heading toward a breakout," he told Israel's Walla News. "They are not heading toward a bomb right now: It may be in the distant future."

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Biden: Omicron Outbreak Will Not Send US 'Back to March 2020'

By - Morgan Artyukhina

US President Joe Biden told Americans in a nationwide address on Tuesday that the country was much better prepared for a new COVID-19 outbreak driven by the Omicron variant than the US was in March 2020, when the global pandemic began.

"We should all be concerned about Omicron, but not panicked," Biden said Tuesday, speaking from the White House.

"Covid has been a tough adversary, but we've shown that we're tougher," he said, noting that vaccines against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and the country's "resolve" were potent weapons.

The US president noted that the country has stockpiled enough gowns, masks, and ventilators to deal with the coming surge of hospitalizations, and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and US National Guard would be mobilized to help support testing, vaccination, and hospital centers, as well.

However, he deflected criticism over the [shortages of COVID-19 tests](#) being reported across the country by noting Omicron had spread "more rapidly than anybody thought."

He encouraged Americans to get vaccinated, noting that while there will be some breakthrough cases, the vaccines are effective at preventing serious illness from developing.

"Folks, the booster shots are free and widely available," Biden said, noting that both he and former US President [Donald Trump had gotten](#) their booster shots. "It may be one of the few things we agree on," he added.

He noted that even if people are fully vaccinated, they should still wear masks while indoors in public spaces as an additional layer of protection.

"If you're not fully vaccinated, you have good reason to be concerned," Biden said, adding that almost all of the 400,000 Americans who died from Covid over the last year were unvaccinated. Speaking just days before the Christmas holiday, when some 109 million Americans are expected to travel to visit family, Biden noted that for those who are fully vaccinated, "you can enjoy the holiday season."

Cases of COVID-19 have exploded in the US in recent days, driven heavily by the Omicron variant, which the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [\(CDC\) said on Monday](#) had become the dominant strain the US just three weeks after the first case was detected in the country.

The variant was first detected just last month by South African scientists, prompting several nations to institute travel bans on flights from several southern African countries, which those nations decried as unfair. Biden told reporters on Tuesday that since Omicron is already so widespread in the US, his administration was considering dropping the travel ban.



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Alex Jones, Michael Flynn Launch Separate Suits to Dodge January 6 Committee Subpoenas  
By - Morgan Artyukhina

InfoWars host Alex Jones and Michael Flynn, a former national security adviser to former US President Donald Trump, have filed separate lawsuits attempting to avoid subpoenas for their phone records by a House committee probing the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol.

The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol has been gathering information on the planning process behind the events on that day, subpoenaing dozens of phone records from people connected to the "Stop the Steal" rally that immediately preceded the riot.

In a [lawsuit filed](#) in a District of Columbia federal court on Monday, Jones argued that the court's [subpoena of phone records](#) from AT&T violates his First Amendment rights as a journalist and that the committee itself is improperly composed according to House regulations.

Jones says that he has offered to hand over documents and answer questions in writing, rather than in an interview, but that the committee declined. He said that if he appears before the committee on January 10 as requested, he should be expected to invoke his First, Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights when refusing to answer their questions.

According to the committee, Jones helped organize the "Stop the Steal" rally outside the White House, including reportedly soliciting a massive donation that provided 80% of the event's funding.

"Mr. Jones has stated that he was told by the White House that he was to lead a march from the January 6th Ellipse rally to the Capitol, where President Trump would meet the group and speak," the committee said in a [November 22 release](#) announcing the subpoena. "Mr. Jones has repeatedly promoted unsupported allegations of election fraud, including encouraging individuals to attend the Ellipse rally on January 6th and implying he had knowledge about the plans of the former President with respect to the rally."

On Tuesday, Flynn reportedly filed a lawsuit of his own against the committee over subpoenas for his phone records, [according to CNN](#).

Flynn, a longtime senior US military intelligence officer, was briefly a member of the Trump administration before resigning just three weeks into Trump's presidency. His resignation followed revelations he had concealed the nature of his communication with Sergey Kislyak, then Russia's ambassador in Washington, DC. He later pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about that conversation, but was pardoned by Trump in November 2020.

In July 2020, Flynn posted a video [replete with references](#) to the QAnon conspiracy theory, which holds that Trump is locked in a secret battle with a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophile Democrats who run the globe. The ideology was a major motivating factor for many of the thousands of people who stormed the Capitol on January 6, believing it was the beginning of a prophesied "Storm" that would sweep away Trump's enemies.

Later, in the run-up to the riot, [Flynn suggested Trump](#) suspend the US Constitution and impose martial law, having the US military facilitate a new election after Trump claimed the November 3, 2020, vote had been fraudulent, thanks to Democratic scheming. Trump lost the election to now-US President Joe Biden.

The attack on the Capitol came while Congress was convened in a joint session to certify the election results. While the rioters gained entry to the national legislature and sent lawmakers running for safety, they failed at their ultimate goal of overturning the results, and police and National Guardsmen soon cleared them from the building.

Five people died in the violent upheaval, including a US Capitol Police officer and a female rioter who was shot by a USCP officer outside the House chamber as she attempted to break through a door.

In the aftermath, Washington, DC, was garrisoned by tens of thousands of troops, who remained for months amid reported threats of further violence that failed to materialize. Trump was impeached on charges of inciting the insurrection, but acquitted by a minority of senators in a trial after he left office.

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#### Omicron Fears Upstage Holiday Cheer - Cartoon

According to US data, the omicron variant of COVID-19 has emerged as the dominant strain of the contagious disease, accounting for 73% of new infections during the week of December 12. While the omicron variant has been characterized as a "milder" strain, experts have warned the exponential increase in infections could overwhelm health systems.

During a Tuesday address to the public, [US President Joe Biden proclaimed that](#), although the omicron variant has spread "more rapidly than anybody thought," the US is better prepared than it was back in March 2020.

He encouraged Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19, pointing out that those who remain unvaccinated "have good reason to be concerned." However, those who have gotten their COVID-19 vaccine "can enjoy the holiday season."

Several iconic holiday events in the US—such as the New Year's Eve ball drop in New York's Times Square—have been scaled back or completely scrapped in efforts to mitigate the spread of the new variant of the highly-contagious disease.

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DHS to Redirect Trump-Era Border Wall Cash to Close US-Mexico Barrier Gaps, Fix Erosion Issues

By - Evan Craighead



Trump-era border wall construction came to a screeching halt on January 20, when US President Joe Biden ordered a pause on all wall-related efforts at the southern US border, and called for a speedy review of the resources appropriated for the project.

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [announced on Monday](#) that it plans to use Trump-era border wall project funds to undertake a number of activities, including the closure of gaps in the US-Mexico barrier, the installation of erosion control measures, and the completion of prior construction on nearby patrol, maintenance, and access roads.

A number of incomplete US Department of Defense projects—primarily in Tucson, Arizona—will be completed to address a variety of safety concerns, the release detailed.

"Work will be completed within the Tucson, El Paso, and Yuma Sectors to address safety concerns by closing construction access gaps that were left open at the time of the border barrier construction pause, and will also include adding missing gates, addressing incomplete foundations, and connecting power to gates that are already hung but are currently inoperable," read the release.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas authorized the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), a subsidiary of the DHS, to carry out activities [originally proposed in April](#).

Shortly after Biden assumed office, his administration took swift action against Trump-era border wall efforts, issuing [a proclamation on January 20](#) that suspended all US-Mexico barrier efforts and ordering the development of a plan to redirect funds and repurpose wall construction contracts.

Biden's suspension of Trump's US-Mexico border wall efforts triggered a backlash from some Republicans, primarily those hailing from the southern US, including Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who inaugurated his first stretch of state-funded barriers on Saturday.

"This unprecedented action is needed for one single reason, and that's because the Biden administration has failed to do its job," Abbott said.

Per CBP data, US authorities encountered more than 1.7 million migrants at the US-Mexico border during fiscal year 2021. Additionally, US border agents apprehended an estimated 1.66 million migrants at the southern border, exceeding the previous record-high of 1.64 million apprehensions in 2000.

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Sarah Jessica Parker, Other 'Sex and the City' Stars Speak on Chris Noth Sexual Assault Allegations

By - Evan Craighead

Since December 16, at least three women have leveled rape and sexual assault allegations against Chris Noth, 67, a star of the "Sex and the City" series whose character was killed off in an HBO Max reboot. Noth denies the allegations, but has been fired from CBS' "The Equalizer" and had a Christmas-themed Peloton commercial pulled from broadcast.

Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis and Cynthia Nixon—the lead trio of the "Sex and the City" reboot "And Just Like That..."—issued a joint statement on Monday commending the women

who have come forward with allegations of sexual assault against Chris Noth, their former co-star.

"We are deeply saddened to hear the allegations against Chris Noth. We support the women who have come forward and shared their painful experiences," the three actresses wrote.

"We know it must be a very difficult thing to do and we commend them for it."

The Hollywood Reporter broke the first sexual assault allegations earlier this month, recounting the alleged personal accounts of two women who said they were raped by the actor in 2004 and 2015.

A day later, [the Daily Beast reported](#) allegations from a woman who said Noth sexually assaulted her in 2010, when she was working as a hostess and lounge singer at Da Marino NYC. The woman, who is admittedly friends with Maria Prudente, the article's author, claimed that the Daily Reporter piece encouraged her to tell her story.

Noth has denied all the allegations.

"These stories could've been from 30 years ago or 30 days ago—no always means no—that is a line I did not cross," Noth claimed in [a statement to the Hollywood Reporter](#), speaking of the first two allegations.

Noth suggested that the timing of the allegations was odd, and that the encounters between the two women in 2004 and 2015 were "consensual."

"It's difficult not to question the timing of these stories coming out. I don't know for certain why they are surfacing now, but I do know this: I did not assault these women," he said.

When asked about the third allegation, Noth's publicist [told the Daily Beast](#) that the actor "denies this as ever happening and has no idea who this woman is."

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Fauci Fires Back, Says Fox News Host 'Should Be Fired On the Spot' for Violent 'Kill Shot' Rhetoric

By - Evan Craighead

During a Monday appearance at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest conference, "The Five" co-host Jesse Watters encouraged a group of young conservatives to confront Dr. Anthony Fauci about the NIH allegedly funding "gain-of-function" research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Watters said footage of such a confrontation would be a "kill shot."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to the president, and top US immunologist and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), stated on Tuesday that Fox News should promptly deliver a pink slip to Watters over his incendiary "kill shot" rhetoric.

"That just is such a reflection of the craziness that goes on in society," Fauci told CNN's John Berman. The latter refused to broadcast Watters' statement in full.

"The only thing that I have ever done, throughout these two years, is to encourage people to practice good public health practices: to be vaccinated; to be careful in public settings; to wear a mask," the chief medical adviser to president said.



"That's awful that he said that," Fauci said of Watters. "He's gonna go—very likely—unaccountable. Whatever network he's on is not going to do anything for him [...] the guy should be fired on the spot."

On Monday, Watters addressed a crowd of young conservatives, encouraging them to go for a rhetorical "kill shot" against Fauci—the nation's top immunologist and director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—by pressing him about allegations that the NIH funded "gain-of-function" research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

"Now you go in for the kill shot. The kill shot—with an ambush? Deadly," Watters told his audience.

He also urged the young conservatives present to record a verbal encounter with Fauci so that it could be broadcast by Fox News opinion host Tucker Carlson and other right-wing media, such as Breitbart and the Daily Caller.

"Get us that! That's what we want," Watters declared. "That changes the whole conversation of the country."

Despite the uproar surrounding Watters' rhetoric, it appears unlikely that Fox News will take action against Watters after the conservative cable news channel defended him in a statement: "Based on watching the full clip and reading the entire transcript, it's more than clear that Jesse Watters was using a metaphor for asking hard-hitting questions to Dr. Fauci about gain-of-function research and his words have been twisted completely out of context."

Late last month, Fox Nation host Lara Logan also received blowback from Fauci and the public after she compared the top US infectious disease expert and chief White House medical officer to Joseph Mengele, a 20th-century Nazi doctor at the Auschwitz extermination camp whose murderous actions led him to be widely referred to as the "Angel of Death."

"And I am talking about people all across the world are saying this," Logan claimed.

Days after her remarks, Fauci told MSNBC's Chris Hayes that he was "astounded" that the Fox network had failed to take action.

"What I find striking, Chris, is how she gets no discipline whatsoever from the Fox network—how they can let her say that with no comment and no disciplinary action," he said.

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**'It Won't Be Like This Forever': Bill Gates Hints Pandemic May End in 2022**

**By - Nevin Brown**

In a series of tweets, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates gave his assessment of the coronavirus pandemic, offering the somber reality that, as the Omicron variant spreads, the next few months could be difficult and dangerous. Nonetheless, he believes that the pandemic could be entering its final year.

Over the past two years, Bill Gates has become an influential voice in the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, however, in the years before the pandemic, he stressed how unprepared the world was for a global health crisis of this magnitude.

Gates has no medical training and is not an epidemiologist but he did establish the COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator in 2020 and, through his [foundation, has committed over \\$1.75 billion to help fight COVID](#). He also frequently talks with top US immunologist Dr Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the chief medical adviser to the president.

Through his philanthropic endeavours and fame, Gates has had access to the best and brightest minds in tackling the pandemic, and the Omicron variant has him concerned. In a series of tweets, Gates provided his best insights into how the coming days, months, and year could unfold.

Omicron was first reported to the [World Health Organisation on November 24th](#), and has since become the dominant strain [in less than a month](#). Compared to Omicron, the [Delta variant proved more transmissible than the Alpha](#) variant which it replaced at the time.

Gates' warning is one of simple statistics and the reality is that Omicron has only been studied for a short time. While there is hope that Omicron is less deadly than the Delta variant, it needs to be remembered that the Delta variant was both more transmissible and deadly than the Alpha strain which it replaced.

The transmission of Omicron is reportedly exponential - if Omicron spreads twice as easily as the Delta variant but is half as deadly, it would still kill more people, according to reports.

[Early indicators](#) suggest that individuals who have been vaccinated are still less likely to be infected with the Omicron variant and are less likely to have severe symptoms. Individuals who have received booster shots have shown better resilience.

While Gates believes the next few months could be bleak, he offers optimism for 2022, underscoring that Omicron's ability to move "quickly" would suggest that the latest wave would "last less than 3 months".

"Those few months could be bad, but I still believe if we take the right steps, the pandemic can be over in 2022", he wrote.

"I know it's frustrating to go into another holiday season with COVID looming over us. But it won't be like this forever. Someday the pandemic will end, and the better we look after each other, the sooner that time will come".

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Listen: NASA Reveals Eerie Sounds of the Solar System's Largest Moon  
By - Nevin Brown

Data collected by NASA's Juno space probe as it flew through Ganymede's magnetosphere, the largest of Jupiter's many moons and the ninth-largest object in the solar system, has revealed some chilling extraterrestrial sounds.

The data was collected on June 7th, using Juno's Waves instrument, which tunes in to electric and magnetic radio waves, before being sent the 504 million miles back to Earth where NASA processed and represented the data using the audio spectrum detectable by the human ear.



[Juno principal investigator Scott Bolton said](#), "If you listen closely, you can hear the abrupt change to higher frequencies around the midpoint of the recording, which represents entry into a different region in Ganymede's magnetosphere."

To collect the data, Juno flew within 645 miles of Ganymede, the closest flyby by a human-built craft since Nasa's Galileo spacecraft's final close approach in May 2000.

The 50-second audio clip was publicly presented at the American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting.

Ganymede is of particular interest to planetary scientists. It is the largest moon in our solar system and the only moon known to have its own magnetic field.

Ganymede is also believed to have a liquid ocean containing a larger volume than all of the oceans of Earth, combined. The combination of a magnetic field and large amounts of liquid water have made Ganymede a potential host for alien life.

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Italian Football Icon Marco Tardelli Blasts 'Arrogant' Liverpool After Tottenham Clash  
By - Nevin Brown

Juventus and Italy great Marco Tardelli sounded off on Liverpool after their back and forth affair against Tottenham on Sunday, calling the side "arrogant." The fixture ended in a 2-2 draw. Tardelli, [in an interview with Gazzetta dello Sport](#), tore into Liverpool's harsh fouls against Tottenham.

He claimed, "The fouls committed in yesterday's match against Tottenham in Italy would have led to 10 days of disqualification."

The foul Tardelli was referring to was a violent swing by Liverpool fullback Andrew Robertson on Tottenham wingback Emerson Royal. The strike against Royal initially resulted in a yellow card from the referee before the video assistant referee (VAR) intervened and Robertson was shown a straight red card.

The match was full of contentious decisions that left fans and pundits alike questioning the validity of the Premier League's VAR system. Earlier in the match, Harry Kane earned a yellow card on a reckless challenge on Robertson that many believed should have earned a red. Tardelli's interview also contained his feelings on Inter Milan's chances against Liverpool in the Champions League round of 16.

"I hear that Liverpool are unplayable. But no team is, especially for this Inter who can do anything. The important thing is that they go out on the pitch with the joy of playing football. Against an opponent like Liverpool, however, you must have a different attitude, in terms of intensity and relationship with the referees....Liverpool are also almost arrogant, all too aware of their strength."

Tardelli's belief that Liverpool receives favorable treatment from referees comes on the heels of a match where many Liverpool supporters believe they had major calls go against them.

His suggestion that Liverpool are arrogant was duly noted as Antonio Conte, Tottenham's manager, remained quiet over officiating following their match, while Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool's manager, was heard berating head referee Paul Tierney.

As a member of Juventus, Tardelli bested Liverpool in the 1985 European Cup Final on the infamous night of the Heysel stadium disaster, in which 39 fans were killed and some 600 injured in a structural collapse of an overcrowded facility, leading to English clubs not participating in European club competitions until 1990-91.

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NHL Will Reportedly Miss Olympic Games Due to COVID-19

By - Nevin Brown

The National Hockey League (NHL) and the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA) have reportedly reached an agreement to not have players participate in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

In the NHL and the NHLPA's most recent collective bargaining agreement, the two sides negotiated the participation of NHL players in the 2022 and 2026 Winter games after NHL players were barred from participating in the 2018 Winter Olympics.

However, [an agreement was reached](#) that if the NHL season was "materially impacted" by COVID-19 that the NHL had until January 10th, 2022 to opt out of Olympic participation without incurring a financial penalty.

The NHLPA had fought hard to regain Olympic participation for its members.

Kyle Conner of the Winnipeg Jets said, "We made it a big part of our collective bargaining agreement as the players, to bring the Olympics back."

The NHL has postponed 50 games as of December 21st and has decided to [postpone all games and activities](#) between December 22nd and 25th. Players will be allowed to return to team facilities on December 26th with games expected to resume on December 27th.

The league will use the scheduled Olympic break between February 6th and 22nd to reschedule the postponed games.

Pittsburg Penguins superstar Sidney Crosby voiced his sadness over the decision, "I've been fortunate enough to be part of two [Olympics]. I definitely feel for the guys who have missed numerous opportunities. It's not something where it's the next year or you push it a couple of months. These are experiences of a lifetime that you don't get very many of as an athlete." Olympic hockey rosters will now be filled with players in professionals in other leagues and amateurs.

A formal announcement on opting out of the 2022 Olympic games is expected to be made in the next 24 hours.

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Music Producer 'Flow La Movie' & Eight Others Die in Plane Crash in the Dominican Republic  
By - Nevin Brown

A charter plane crashed while attempting an emergency landing near Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The aircraft was carrying seven passengers, including music producer Flow La Movie, and two crew members. There were no survivors.

The charter flight, a Gulfstream IV aircraft operated by the Helidosa Aviation Group, departed La Isabela International Airport in the Dominican Republic on Wednesday for Miami, Florida.

[According to data from FlightRadar24](#), the plane immediately encountered problems upon takeoff. The aircraft circled Santo Domingo before making an emergency landing at Las Américas International Airport. The plane crashed near the runway and burst into flames. Of the nine deceased, six were American citizens. Producer José Ángel Hernández, better known as Flow La Movie, was one of the passengers. He produced the hit Spanish language song "Te Bote," and his company Flow La Movie has had success growing the careers of several Puerto Rican rappers.

The official video to the Te Bote Remix, featuring Casper, Nio García, Darell, Nicky Jam, Bad Bunny and Ozuna on Youtube accrued over 2 billion views since April of 2018.

The Helidosa Aviation Group, which operated the plane, issued a release shortly after the incident identifying all those aboard.

An investigation into the crash is ongoing. Officials have yet to determine a cause.

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RPT - AstraZeneca, Oxford in Early Stages of Producing Vaccine for Omicron Strain -  
Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca and Oxford University have taken preliminary steps to produce a coronavirus vaccine to defend against the Omicron variant, the company's global media relations manager Flavia Garcia told Sputnik.

"Together with Oxford University, we have taken preliminary steps in producing an Omicron variant vaccine, in case it is needed, and will be informed by emerging data," Garcia said in a statement on Tuesday.

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North America's National Hockey League Players to Skip Winter Olympics in Beijing- Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - National Hockey League (NHL) players will participate in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing as the NHL reached a joint agreement with their labor

union - the National Hockey League Players' Association - to skip the event, the Washington Post said on Tuesday.

An official announcement will be coming in the next several days, the report said, citing sources familiar with the situation.

On Monday, the NHL became the first professional sports league in North America to postpone the regular season given that 15 percent of its players have been placed on COVID-19 protocols. About 50 games have so far been postponed in the December 23-26 period.

Such a situation has led to doubts about whether there would be enough time to reschedule the games if a season break took place during the Olympics, the report said.

The NHL and the NHLPA did not respond to the Sputnik requests for comment.

The captain of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Steven Stamkos, expressed regret about NHL's decision to skip the Olympics.

"You grow up dreaming of winning a Stanley Cup and I've been able to accomplish that. You grow up wanting to represent your country and win a gold medal. That's something I probably won't have a chance to do now," Stamkos said as quoted by journalist Joe Smith via Twitter.

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#### **Pentagon Says Russia's Statement on US Preparing Provocation in Ukraine 'False'**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby called "false" the statement made by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu that US private military companies located in the Donetsk region are preparing a provocation with chemical components in eastern Ukraine.

"Those statements by Minister Shoigu are completely false," Kirby said during a briefing on Tuesday. When asked how he knows that, Kirby repeated, "They are false."

The spokesperson also said US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has not talked to Shoigu and has no plans to do so yet.

Earlier on Tuesday, Shoigu said that containers with unidentified chemical components have been delivered to the cities of Avdeevka and Krasny Liman to commit provocations.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, there are about 120 employees of US private military companies training Ukrainian special forces in the Donetsk region.

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#### **Former Trump National Security Adviser Flynn Sues to Block Phone Records Probe - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Michael Flynn, who briefly served as National Security Adviser to President Donald Trump, has launched a new lawsuit to prevent the US House of



Representatives Select Committee probe into the events at the US Capitol on January 6 from accessing his phone records, media reported.

Flynn's new lawsuit was revealed on Tuesday, CNN reported. It is the eighth legal challenge into the Democrat-led Select Committee's efforts to investigate Trump's attempts to get the result of the November 2020 presidential election overturned, the report said.

The panel has now subpoenaed six former Trump administration officials, including William Stepien, Jason Miller, Angela McCallum, John Eastman, Bernard Kerik and Flynn, Select Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson said earlier.

In November of 2020, Trump issued a pardon for Flynn, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during a probe into allegations of Trump-Russia collusion prior to and during the 2016 US presidential election. The investigation undertaken by Special Counsel Robert Mueller found no evidence of collusion and Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system. Flynn was the only person convicted within the investigation by Mueller into possible collusion. However, evidence emerged later on that the FBI framed Flynn and the Justice Department dropped the case.

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#### Magnitude 6 Earthquake Strikes Off Alaska Coast - US Geological Survey

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - An earthquake with a magnitude of 6 on the Richter scale was registered with an epicenter off the coast of Alaska, the US Geological Survey (USGS).

The earthquake occurred 61 kilometers east of the city of Port Alsworth at a depth of 152,6 km, the USGS said on Tuesday evening.

No immediate reports of material damage on the coast or inland have been reported so far.

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#### US to Allow Some Inmates Released During Pandemic Not to Return to Prison - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Inmates placed on home confinement due to the risk posed by the novel coronavirus will not necessarily be returned to prison, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement.

"Thousands of people on home confinement have reconnected with their families, have found gainful employment, and have followed the rules... We will exercise our authority so that those who have made rehabilitative progress and complied with the conditions of home confinement, and who in the interests of justice should be given an opportunity to continue transitioning back to society, are not unnecessarily returned to prison," the statement said on Tuesday.

Garland's statement was prompted by an opinion issued by the Office of legal Counsel on Tuesday that said the US Bureau of Prisons has discretion to permit prisoners in extended home confinement to remain there, despite prior plans to recall the prisoners once the coronavirus pandemic ends.

The Director of the Bureau of Prisons was initially authorized to place prisoners on home confinement under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed during the Trump administration.

Garland said in the statement that he directed the Justice Department to engage in a rulemaking process to ensure that they live up to the letter and spirit of the CARES Act in light of the Office Legal Counsel opinion.

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#### UN Proposing Paying Taliban Almost \$6Mln for Protection in Afghanistan - Reports

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is proposing paying the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorist activities) almost \$6 million to subsidize the wages of its fighters who are guarding United Nations facilities, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

The \$6 million in payments would be made to the Taliban to subsidize the fighters' monthly wages and provide them a food allowance as part of an expansion of an accord made under the previous Afghan government, the report said on Tuesday.

The funding would primarily be used to boost the wages of the Taliban guards by \$275-\$319 per month and provide a monthly food allowance of \$90, the report said.

About 3,500 UN personnel serve in Kabul and ten field offices that are protected by the Taliban. However, there are questions about whether the payments would violate UN and US sanctions on the Taliban and their leadership, the report said.

The payments would purportedly be made to the Afghan Interior Ministry, which is currently under the leadership of FBI-wanted and US-sanctioned Taliban deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani, the report also said.

Questions have been raised about whether the United Nations could detect the diversions of the payments for other purposes, the report added.

A US Treasury Department official said that the Taliban and Haqqani network remain under sanctions and unauthorized supporters of them risk exposure to sanctions of their own, according to the report. Charles Holmes - [ethan.holmes@sputniknews.com](mailto:ethan.holmes@sputniknews.com)

Subject:

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#### AstraZeneca, Oxford in Early Stages of Producing Vaccine for Omicron Strain - Spokesperson



WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca and Oxford University have taken preliminary steps to produce a coronavirus vaccine to defend against the Omicron variant, the company's global media relations manager Flavia Garcia told Sputnik.

"Together with Oxford University, we have taken preliminary steps in producing an Omicron variant vaccine, in case it is needed, and will be informed by emerging data," Garcia said in a statement on Tuesday.

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#### **NASA Delays James Webb Space Telescope Launch to Christmas Day - Statement**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - NASA is delaying the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope mission from French Guiana from Friday, December 24 to Saturday, Christmas Day, the US space agency announced in an update.

"[D]ue to adverse weather conditions at Europe's Spaceport in French Guiana, the flight VA256 to launch Webb - initially scheduled for December 24 - is being postponed," NASA said in the update on Tuesday. "The new targeted launch date is December 25, as early as possible."

The new proposed launch window time on Saturday will be between 7:20 a.m. and 7:52 a.m., Washington, DC time, which is between 9:20 a.m. and 9:52 a.m. local launch time in Kourou, the update said.

"NASA and Arianespace successfully completed the Launch Readiness Review for the James Webb Space Telescope on Dec. 21. The team authorized the Ariane 5 rocket carrying Webb to rollout and the start of launch sequencing for the mission," the update added.

On Wednesday evening, another weather forecast will be issued in order to confirm the date of December 25. The Ariane 5 launch vehicle and Webb are in stable and safe conditions in the Final Assembly Building, according to NASA.

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#### **Raytheon Wins \$578Mln Deal to Make More Standard Missile-2 Interceptors - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Missiles and Defense has won a more than \$578 million contract to make more Standard Missile-2 (SM-2) interceptors for the US Navy and for South Korea, Denmark, Taiwan, Spain, Chile, Japan, Germany and the Netherlands, the US Defense Department said.

"Raytheon Missiles & Defense was awarded a \$578,314,177 US Navy modification contract for Standard Missile-2 (SM-2) production for the Navy and for South Korea, Denmark, Taiwan, Netherlands, Spain, Chile, Japan and Germany," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The contract will also include production of all up rounds, instrumentation kits, engineering services and spares, the release added.

Almost half the work on the contract (45%) will be performed in Tucson in the US state of Arizona and is expected to be completed by December 2026, according to the release.

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Blinken, Lithuanian Prime Minister Discuss US Support Amid China's 'Economic Coercion' (Updates with details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Lithuanian counterpart Ingrida Simonyte discussed over the telephone the United States' support in countering China's economic activity, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte," Price said on Tuesday. "Secretary Blinken highlighted US support for Lithuania in the face of these actions and reaffirmed the US commitment to work with like-minded countries to push back against the PRC's [People's Republic of China] coercive diplomatic and economic behavior."

Blinken and Simonyte highlighted reports that China's customs authorities are not clearing Lithuanian shipments or shipments with Lithuanian components, and that China is also rejecting import applications from Lithuania, the report said.

The two diplomats also discussed the geopolitical challenges Lithuania faces in eastern Europe, Price said.

The European Union is gathering evidence and considering the possibility of opening a case in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in relation to the trade dispute between Lithuania and China. Beijing downgraded its diplomatic relations with the Baltic nation in November after Taiwan opened a representative office in Vilnius. China claims Taiwan as its territory.

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US Stocks Rally Hard First Time in Week Since Omicron Variant Spike

NEW YORK, December 21 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rallied hard for the first time in a week, with buyers scooping up stocks cheapened by a series of selloffs triggered by fear about the coronavirus' resurgence via the Omicron variant.

Adding to the positivity of US equity markets was President Joe Biden's assurance that he was trying to salvage his signature \$1.75 trillion infrastructure bill that had been opposed by a key Democratic lawmaker. The significance of the bill was underscored by Goldman Sachs' decision on Monday to slash US growth projections for 2022.



"Investors want to be optimistic leading up to the holidays and lawmakers on Capitol Hill will not want to be painted the villain, so all the rhetoric will likely be upbeat for the rest of the week," Ed Moya, equities analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The Big Tech sector was the biggest winner of the day. The Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed up 2.4% after dropping a net 4% over six previous sessions.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished up 1.8% after dropping 3% since the close of December 10.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, one of Wall Street's three key benchmarks that had taken the worst beating in the past six sessions, rose 1.6% after an 11% decline in the past six sessions.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new cases as of last week.

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US City of Chicago to Require Proof of COVID-19 Vaccination in Public Places - Mayor

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US city of Chicago will require proof of vaccination against COVID-19 for entry into public places such as restaurants, gyms, bars and other venues that serve food and drinks, Mayor Lori Lightfoot said.

"We didn't want it to get to this point, but given the situation we find ourselves in, we have no choice," Lightfoot said in a message via Twitter on Tuesday. "Beginning Jan. 3, you must show proof you are fully vax'd to enter bars, restaurants, fitness centers, and entertainment/recreational venues where food/drink are served."

The Chicago Department of Public Health said the decision was driven in part by the spread of the coronavirus Omicron variant and in line with requirements already in place in other big US cities, including New York City and Los Angeles. Anyone aged 5 and above will have to be fully vaccinated to enter the public places in Chicago, she said.

The Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new cases as of last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

"This order will remain in effect until the city deems that the threat of COVID-19 to public health has diminished significantly," Lightfoot said. To put it simply, if you have been living vaccine-free, your time is up. If you wish to live life as w/the ease to do the things you love, you must be vax'd."

Lightfoot said the city authorities wanted as many people as possible to be vaccinated against the coronavirus and it was no accident if the order appeared an inconvenience to the unvaccinated.

"In fact, it is inconvenient by design," she said.

Earlier on Tuesday, US President Joe Biden addressed the nation urging Americans to do their part by getting vaccinated, after warning during the weekend that those without immunity from the virus face a winter of severe illness and death.

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#### **US Trade Authorities Claim Russia Moving Away From World Trade Organization Commitments**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Russia has continued to move away from its World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments during 2021 by maintaining restrictive trade policies, the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a report.

"Over the past year, Russia has continued its trajectory of an economy moving away from the guiding principles of the WTO: non-discrimination, freer trade, predictability, transparency and fair competition," the Report on the Implementation and Enforcement of Russia's WTO Commitments said on Tuesday.

Russia maintains restrictive at-the-border and behind-the-border measures that inhibit trade, the report said. The country's industrial policy seems to be driven by the guiding principles of import substitution and forced localization, the report added.

The report also highlighted Russia's alleged "non-science based" import restrictions in the agricultural sector, import substitution strategies in the information technology sector and preferential treatment of domestic goods and services.

The report was prepared pursuant to legislation that requires the Office of the US Trade Representative to submit a report to Congress assessing the extent to which Russia has implemented its WTO commitments after nine years of membership in the organization.

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#### **Blinken, Lithuanian Prime Minister Discuss US Support Amid China's 'Economic Coercion**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Lithuanian counterpart Ingrida Simonyte discussed over the telephone the United States' support to counter China's economic activity, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte," Price said on Tuesday. "Secretary Blinken highlighted US support for Lithuania in the face of these actions and reaffirmed the US commitment to work with like-minded countries to push back against the PRC's [People's Republic of China] coercive diplomatic and economic behavior."

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## US Court Sets Detention, Arrangement Hearing for Russian National Klyushin for December 22

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A US court in the state of Massachusetts has set detention and arrangement hearing for the Russian national Vladislav Klyushin for Wednesday, the court document said.

"Government moves for detention, Arraignment/Detention Hearing set for 12/22/2021 01:00 PM in Remote Proceeding," the court document said on Tuesday.

The hearing will be conducted by video conference, the court document added.

On Monday, Acting US Attorney Nathaniel Mendell said the indictment charges Klyushin and four other Russian nationals over alleged involvement in a global hacking and trading scheme have been unsealed.

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## US Approves \$1.32Bln Sale of Aircraft Launch System to France - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved the sale of an electromagnetic launching and landing system on carriers at sea costing more than \$1.32 billion to France, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of France of Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS), Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG), and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.321 billion," the DSCA said in a press release on Tuesday.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale on Tuesday, the release said.

"The government of France has requested to buy one Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS), two launcher configuration and one Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG), three engine configuration," the release added.

The prime contractors for the project will be General Atomics-Electromagnetic Systems Group in San Diego, California, and Huntington Ingalls Industries in Newport News, Virginia, according to the release.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) -

## GERMANY-RUSSIA TALKS

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

- \* Putin pointed out that Kiev was still stubbornly evading fulfilling its obligations under the Minsk agreements thereby hindering holding a summit in the Normandy format, the Kremlin said.

- \* Putin briefed Scholz about Russia's proposals on security guarantees, which rule out any further NATO advance eastward, the Kremlin said.

#### RUSSIA SECURITY PROPOSALS

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke over the telephone with French President Emmanuel Macron about the proposed security guarantees between Russia and the United States, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

- \* Russia hopes to have constructive and meaningful negotiations on the security guarantees with the United States with a visible final result, Putin said.

- \* The United States is willing to work on some things outlined in Russia's security proposals, but there are other items in them that are unacceptable, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said.

- \* Some ill-wishers of Russia interpret Moscow's proposals on security guarantees as an ultimatum, but this is not the case, Putin said.

- \* Russia's proposals on security guarantees to NATO and the United States meet the interests of China, Konstantin Gavrillov, the head of the Russian delegation at the Vienna talks on military security and arms control, said.

#### US-RUSSIA ENGAGEMENTS

- \* The United States so far has no plans for another meeting between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

- \* The United States expects new engagements with Russia relatively early in the new year, including via the NATO-Russia Council, OSCE and other formats, Blinken said.

#### INCIDENT IN THE BOSPHORUS

- \* The navigation of ships through the Bosphorus is suspended due to an accident involving a tanker and tugboats are already sent to the scene, the Turkish Coast Guard said on Tuesday.

- \* The movement of ships through the Bosphorus, previously suspended due to the tanker accident, has been resumed, the Turkish Coast Guard told Sputnik.

#### PUTIN-MACRON TALKS

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed with French President Emmanuel Macron the settlement of the internal Ukrainian conflict and Kiev's unwillingness to fulfill the Minsk agreements, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

- \* Russia and France intend to act synchronously on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin reported following a phone conversation between Putin and Macron.

- \* Putin raised the issue related to restrictions on RT in France during a phone conversation with Macron, the Kremlin said.

#### EUROPEAN GAS MARKETS



\* The price of European gas futures is growing by over 27% on Tuesday, exceeding \$2,150 per thousand cubic meters for the first time in history, according to data from the London-based ICE exchange.

#### **NATO-RUSSIA DEVELOPMENTS**

\* NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday that the NATO-Russia Council will hopefully convene in 2022.

\* Ukraine's decision to join NATO is not subject to a compromise or negotiations with Russia, Stoltenberg said.

\* The United States and NATO are increasing the scale of their military exercises near Russia, using strategic aviation and conducting simulated launches of nuclear missiles, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

\* Russia will consider all possible options if NATO refuses to discuss proposals on security guarantees, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said.

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#### **Northrop Grumman Completes Second Test Flight of New Area Denial Missile – Release**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Northrop Grumman has successfully carried out the second test flight of its new anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missile to meet key objectives in a US Air Force program, the company announced on Tuesday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation successfully completed the second flight test of its new anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missile, demonstrating capabilities that will meet key objectives for the upcoming Stand-in Attack Weapon (SiAW) program," the press release said.

The test was completed utilizing a company-owned CRJ-700 aircraft as the testbed for the air to surface mission computer and sensors, Northrop Grumman said. The company invested to actively mature and test its A2/AD missile design, which meets US Air Force requirements for SiAW and other programs, it said.

"Featuring open architecture interfaces, the Northrop Grumman solution will bridge current requirements while enabling rapid future upgrades to meet changing mission requirements," the release said.

The second flight test demonstrated the capability of the missile sensor systems combined with the mission computer and was the first of a new series of company funded flight tests which will continue to test the system with more stressing scenarios in preparation for the missile launch in 2022, the company said.

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#### **BAE Systems, Brazil's Embraer Seek to Develop Eve eVTOL Aircraft for Defense Market**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – BAE Systems in the United Kingdom and Embraer in Brazil are joining forces to develop the latter company's Eve's electric Vertical Take Off and Landing (eVTOL) vehicle for defense sales, BAE said on Tuesday.

"BAE Systems and Embraer Defense & Security have announced plans to embark on a joint study to explore the development of Eve's electric eVTOL vehicle for the defense and security market," the press release said.

The joint study will build on Eve's development for the urban air mobility market and will look at how the aircraft could provide cost-effective, sustainable and adaptable capability as a defense variant, BAE explained.

"Engineers from BAE Systems' Air sector in Lancashire, UK, will work with the Embraer Defense & Security team based São José dos Campos, in Brazil to explore how a defense variant could be used for applications such as personnel transportation, surveillance, reconnaissance and disaster relief," BAE said.

The all-electric aircraft is part of Embraer's commitment toward more sustainable aviation and has come out of Eve, an independent company dedicated to accelerating the global Urban Air Mobility (UAM) ecosystem, BAE Systems Air sector Chief Operating Officer Ian Muldowney said in the release.

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**US Approves Possible \$125Mln Sale of 230 Javelin Missiles to Lithuania - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a possible \$125 million sale of 230 Javelin missiles to Lithuania, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Lithuania of Javelin Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$125 million," the agency said in a press release.

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**Biden Says Considering Reversing Southern African COVID Travel Ban, Will Talk to Team Soon**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The White House is considering reversing the travel ban on southern African countries prompted by the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant there since the virus is already widespread in the United States, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"I'm considering reversing [the travel ban]. I'm going to talk with my team in the next couple of days," Biden said following remarks on the Omicron variant.



The Biden administration in November decided to ban travel from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi in what Chief Presidential Medical Advisor Anthony Fauci called a "temporary measure" to give experts extra time to analyze the Omicron variant.

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Biden Says New COVID Mutations Can Be Deadlier Than Before

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that new COVID-19 variants can be deadlier than the previous ones.

"The longer the virus is around, the more likely variants form, that may be deadlier than the ones before," Biden warned.

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US Considering Halting Russia's Imports of Smartphone, Aircraft and Auto Parts - Reports  
(Adds details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US officials will meet later on Tuesday to discuss measures against Russia should it invade Ukraine, which may include halting its ability to import smartphones, aircraft and automobile parts, and other key materials from other sectors, Reuters reported, citing a Biden administration official.

US officials will consult with major partners in Europe and Asia that may be impacted by these measures, the report said.

Tensions around Ukraine have been aggravated in the past several weeks by an alleged Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

The United States would use extraordinary export control measures to prevent Russia from importing industrial and consumer technologies, which could have a big impact on Russian consumers, industrial operations and employment, the report said.

The Biden administration would specifically use the same tools the Trump administration used to ban Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from accessing certain advanced semiconductors, the report said.

The Trump administration added Huawei to the "entity list" in May 2019, which basically prohibited American companies from doing business with the Chinese tech giant without prior US government approval. The US sanctions brought serious challenges to Huawei's smartphone business, as the company struggled to secure supplies of microprocessors for its devices because of US dominance in the smartphone chipset industry.

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**US Considering Halting Russia's Imports of Smartphones, Aircraft and Auto Parts - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US officials will meet later on Tuesday to discuss measures against Russia should it invade Ukraine, which may include halting its ability to import smartphones, aircraft and automobile parts, and other key materials from other sectors, Reuters reported on Tuesday, citing a Biden administration official.

US officials will consult with major partners in Europe and Asia that may be impacted by these measures, the report said.

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**Russia Mission to UN to Hold Informal Meeting of UNSC on Human Rights in Ukraine, Baltics**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Russian mission to the United Nations will hold an informal meeting of the UN Security Council on human and ethnic minorities' rights in Ukraine and the Baltic countries, Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"On December 22 at 6 p.m. of Moscow time (15:00 p.m. GMT) our mission is holding an informal meeting of the UN Security Council on so-called 'Arria Formula' on respecting human and ethnic minorities rights in Baltic countries and Ukraine. We will discuss a topic of glorification of Nazi criminals and their accomplices in these states," Polyanskiy said via his Telegram channel.

UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues Fernand de Varennes, along with representatives of non-government organizations, experts and activists from Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia, will deliver remarks during the meeting.

"We are sure that it will be useful for our colleagues in the Security Council to learn "first-hand" about the real situation in these countries, information about which they try not to notice here," Polyanskiy said.

The meeting will be broadcasting through UN website and the Russian Mission YouTube channel, he added.

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**US Expects New Engagements With Russia Early in New Year - Blinken**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States expects new engagements with Russia relatively early in the new year, including via the NATO-Russia Council, OSCE and other formats, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"We have said, and Russia has also said, that we are prepared to engage diplomatically through multiple channels - the existing strategic stability dialogue that we have with Russia, between Russia and the United States, through the NATO-Russia Council on issues of particular concern to NATO and through the OSCE," Blinken told the press. "I think you'll see relatively early in the new year engagements in all of those areas to see if we can advance differences diplomatically."

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US Currently Has No Plans for Another Biden-Putin Meeting - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States so far has no plans for another meeting between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"No plans to do that now," Blinken said. "I think we have to see if in the first instance there is any progress diplomatically. We also want to see Russia deescalate, to move forces back from the border with Ukraine, to take down the tension."

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UK-Based Banking Giant Pleads Guilty to Fraud in US Treasury Markets - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A United Kingdom-based global banking and financial services firm has agreed to pay \$35 million in fines, restitution, and forfeiture to fraud schemes in markets for US Treasury securities and futures contracts, the US Justice Department said on Friday,

"NatWest Markets, a London, UK-based global banking and financial services firm, pleaded guilty today to various fraud schemes in the markets for US Treasury securities and futures contracts," the Justice Department said in a press release.

NatWest pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud and one count of securities fraud in connection with criminal information filed in Connecticut, the release said. US District Judge Omar Williams accepted the pleas and sentenced NatWest to pay \$35 million in a criminal fine, restitution, and forfeiture, the release added.

"As we have previously warned, there will be serious consequences for a company that breaches the terms of an agreement with the government. Today's guilty plea by NatWest and the associated penalty show exactly that," Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said in the release.



NatWest also will serve three years of probation and will agree to the imposition of an independent compliance monitor, according to the release.

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#### **White House Might Cut Quarantine for Healthcare Workers With COVID - Fauci**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is studying whether it is safe to reduce the standard 10-day quarantine period for healthcare workers infected with COVID-19 but without symptoms so that they could continue attending to sick people, White House pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci said Tuesday.

The general period of quarantine is "still 10 days," Fauci said in an interview with MSNBC, before adding: "But, you know, one of the things that we're going to be thinking about is particularly among healthcare providers who might get infected and be without symptoms. We want to be careful that we don't keep them out of action for that long period of time. So there's at least consideration, that hasn't been decided yet, but consideration of diminishing the quarantine."

Fauci's remarks came amid a COVID-19 resurgence fueled by the new Omicron variant and media reports that US hospitals and their intensive care units are being swamped again with coronavirus patients.

The Omicron is now the dominant COVID strain in the United States, accounting for more than 73% of new coronavirus cases as of last week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. President Joe Biden is scheduled to speak about the pandemic in an address later on Tuesday, where he is expected to announce the free delivery of a half billion COVID testing kits to Americans.

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#### **US Immigration Enforcement to Test Use of Body Cameras on Several Agents - DHS**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Several agents with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will be equipped with body cameras while on duty as part of a pilot program designed to increase transparency, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Tuesday.

"Today, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced a pilot program in select cities where ICE law enforcement officers will begin to wear body worn cameras for pre-planned operations," DHS said in a press release.

The body cameras will first be issued with Homeland Security Investigations special agents in Houston, Texas; Newark, New Jersey; and New York City, the release said.

The release explained that the body cameras will enhance ICE operations, including at-large arrests, execution of search warrants, and questioning of individuals in the field. The body camera footage could also be used for non-investigative purposes, including for training and assessing officer performance, the release added.

US media reported that 55 agents will participate in the pilot program.

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**At Least 40% of Registered US Voters Think Biden, Democrats Have Under-Performed - Poll**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Some 41% of registered US voters believe President Joe Biden and his Democrat allies in Congress have achieved less than expected since he took office almost a year ago, a new poll by the research firm Morning Consult and the news portal Politico revealed on Tuesday.

Thirty-two percent of respondents said lawmakers have accomplished about what was expected of them while only 10% said they exceeded expectations, the poll showed.

Morning Consult and Politico, which conducted the poll from December 18 through 20, found similar numbers for the performance of President Biden himself. Some 42% said the president accomplished less than expected and 38% were of the view that he performed to expectations while 11% thought he exceeded them.

Biden took office on January 20 with the promise of defeating the coronavirus pandemic, putting jobs and economic recovery back on track and ensuring a fairer immigration process into the United States.

The economy is rebounding with a Federal Reserve growth forecast of 5.5% for this year and 4% for 2022, after a 3.5% decline in 2020 - the year of the coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic is, however, spiking again, with variants such as the Delta and Omicron creating concern about possible economic disruptions in the future.

On the immigration front, estimated 1.7 million people, including unaccompanied minors, have so far crossed the US-Mexico border since Biden signed an executive order condemning his predecessor Donald Trump's policy of separating families of detained illegal immigrants.

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**UN Says Libya Mission Chief in Touch With Libyan Parties Over Election Uncertainty**

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - UN Support Mission in Libya Deputy Head of Political Affairs Stephanie Williams is engaging with parties in the country over election uncertainty just three days before a vote is scheduled to take place, United Nations deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"Obviously, the date of the elections is three days from today, so you are as good of a judge as I am on how likely it is that everything can be done in the next 72 hours. Having said that, Stephanie Williams is in touch with different Libyan parties. It's very clear that if there is to be any adjustment, any sort of technical adjustment to the electoral program, that it's something that needs to be agreed," Haq said during a press briefing.

On Thursday, armed assailants seized the Libyan National Unity Government and Defense Ministry buildings in the capital city of Tripoli and demanded the elections, which are scheduled for December 24, be postponed.

A source in Tripoli told Sputnik on Tuesday that the elections will be postponed by over four months and the Presidential Council will propose the continued operation of the National Unity Government until then. The announcement about the postponement will be made in several days, the source added.

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Pharmacy, Pain Clinics Heads Arrested for Dispensing 4Mln Opioid Pills - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US federal authorities have indicted the heads of three pharmacies and two pain clinics in the state of Texas for dispensing nearly four million opioid pills, the Justice Department announced on Tuesday.

"Three Houston-area pharmacists, a doctor, and a pharmacy technician have been arrested for allegedly running three pharmacies and two clinics as 'pill mills,' distributing hydrocodone, oxycodone, and other controlled drugs without a legitimate medical purpose," the Justice Department said in a press release.

According to court documents, since January 2018, Chrisco Pharmacy, Keystone Pharmacy and Peoples Pharmacy illegally dispensed nearly four million pills of the Schedule II opioids hydrocodone and oxycodone. Keystone owner and pharmacist-in-charge Anthony Obute, 46, of Houston, was indicted, the release said.

"Ophelia Emeakoroha, 50, of Pearland, was arrested on Dec. 2 on a criminal complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, alleging that Emeakoroha, the pharmacist-in-charge at Peoples, illegally distributed and dispensed hydrocodone and oxycodone," the release added.

Shivarajpur Ravi, 65, of Houston, was arrested on December 2 on a criminal complaint that he ran two pill-mill clinics in the Houston area. Also, Christopher Obaze, 61 of Richmond, and Eric Tubbe 36, of Rosenberg, were arrested on charges related to their alleged illicit operation of Chrisco, according to the release.

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UN Chief Urges Countries to Increase Support for Lebanese Military to Maintain Stability



UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday called on the international community to maintain and increase support for the Lebanese armed forces in an attempt to stabilize Lebanon.

"I'd like to stress that continuing international support of the Lebanese armed forces is essential for the stability of Lebanon," Guterres said during a press conference. "I encourage all states to continue and, more important, to increase that support."

Guterres also called on Lebanon to undertake a swift start on formal negotiations and finalize the agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In addition, Guterres called on the political leaders in Lebanon to implement much needed government reforms that will address the needs of the Lebanese people and allow for an economic recovery.

Last week, Guterres said he had scheduled a four-day visit to Lebanon at the invitation of the Lebanese government in an effort to express solidarity with the Lebanese people.

Lebanon has been facing a severe economic crisis since 2019, with its banking system collapsing and the currency plummeting 15 times. According to the World Bank estimates, real GDP fell by 21.5 percent in 2020, while inflation soared to 85 percent. Energy and commodity prices have skyrocketed and businesses collapsed, leaving about 80 percent of the population below the poverty line.

Last year, Lebanon began talks with the IMF on the provision of economic assistance, but negotiations were derailed as the parties failed to agree on the amount of the financial losses.

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**Blinken Discusses Efforts to Fight Omicron With International Counterparts – State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discussed efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, including the newly discovered Omicron variant, during a virtual meeting with several foreign ministers and regional organization representatives, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met virtually with several foreign ministers and representatives of regional organizations involved in the response to the Omicron variant today," the press release said. "They exchanged information to better understand the Omicron variant, coordinate a global response, and accelerate efforts to combat COVID-19."

During the meeting, the top US diplomat called on partners to redouble international and domestic efforts to end the pandemic and discussed regional impacts of the Omicron variant. Earlier in the day, Blinken announced that the United States has allocated an extra \$580 million to support the pandemic response of seven multilateral organizations, including the WHO, UNICEF and FAO.

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**UAE Agents Bugged Khashoggi Wife's Cell Phone Before His Murder - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - United Arab Emirates (UAE) agents secretly bugged the cell phone of Saudi columnist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi's wife in 2018 months before he was murdered in the Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

What was described as a powerful spyware was surreptitiously attached to the phone of Khashoggi's wife, Hanan Elatr, several months before he was killed and his body dismembered by Saudi agents in October of 2018, the report said.

The UAE action was uncovered by a group of news organizations investigating Khashoggi's murder, the report said. Khashoggi had been a writer for the Washington Post and a leading critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman before his death.

The spyware used to bug Elatr's phone was called Pegasus owned and sold around the world by the Israeli NSO Group, the report added.

A forensic analysis of the phone showed that the compromising spyware had been put on it manually in April 2018 while Elatr was being questioned by UAE officials, according to the report.

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**US Population Up by 0.1% in 2021, Lowest Rate in History – Census Bureau**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US population has grown by 0.1% or 392,665, the lowest rate in the country's history, the Census Bureau said on Tuesday.

"According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2021 national and state population estimates and components of change released today, the population of the United States grew in the past year by 392,665, or 0.1%, the lowest rate since the nation's founding," the press release said.

The Census Bureau believes the main causes that have led to such a drop in population growth are decreased international migration and fertility, and increased mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The year of 2021 has become the first year since 1937 when the US population grew by less than one million people, while the last slowest rate of growth in 20th century was in 1918-1919 amid the influenza pandemic and World War I, the release noted.

The US has seen a decline in births and international migration and an increase in deaths since the mid-2010s, according to the release.

As of today, the US population is 333 million, making America the third most populous country in the world.

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**Russia Ready to Hold Israeli-Palestinian Reunifying Meeting - Deputy Envoy to UN**

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - Russia is willing to hold a reunifying meeting between Israel and the Palestinian leaders in Moscow once the latter are ready to have a common approach to resolve the peace process, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"We call upon the parties to resume the peace process on the international legal basis which includes a two state solution formula," Polyanskiy said. "We continue to be ready to hold a meeting in Moscow once leaders of the Palestinian political forces are ready to have a common approach and are ready to put this into a document, and we count on support of other interested parties."

Polyanskiy said the parties need to give up on provocations and unilateral steps that lead to irreversible facts on the ground.

The Russian diplomat pointed out that an important condition overcoming the practice is overcoming the intra-Palestinian rift on the basis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lasted for decades as the Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition for their independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and builds settlements in the occupied areas, despite objections from the United Nations.

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**New York City Offers \$100 Incentive to Get COVID-19 Vaccine Booster by New Year - Mayor**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - New York City is offering \$100 to every resident who will receive a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose before the new year, Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Tuesday.

"So as of today, we're announcing a \$100 incentive for everyone who goes out and gets a booster, here in New York City, between now and the end of the year, so it's a limited time opportunity over these next days," de Blasio said during a press conference.

On Sunday, White House Chief Medical Adviser Anthony Fauci said hospitals in the United States may face an increased burden due to the spread of the coronavirus Omicron strain. The United States is reportedly going through another COVID-19 upswing with about 130,000 cases reported daily. About 60% of the US population is fully vaccinated, while 50 million eligible Americans have decided not to receive a vaccine due to risk of potential side effects or due to having natural immunity.



White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday that the US federal government sent 30 ambulances and crews to New York to help balance patient loads among hospitals across the state.

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**UN Human Rights Office Reports 13 Allegations of Rape During Protests in Sudan on Sunday**

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The UN Human Rights Office said on Tuesday that they have received reports about security forces in Sudan having raped 13 women during protests in the capital of Khartoum over the weekend.

"We have received deeply disturbing reports of sexual violence and harassment by security forces during demonstrations in Khartoum on Sunday, 19 December 2021," UN Human Rights Office said in a press release. "Our Joint Human Rights Office in Sudan has received allegations that 13 women and girls were victims of rape or gang rape."

There are also allegations of sexual harassment by security forces against women who were trying to flee the area near the presidential palace on Sunday evening in Sudan, the release said.

The demonstration took place to mark the third anniversary of protests that resulted in the overthrow of former Sudanese President Omar Bashir in April of 2019.

Two protesters died after being shot and some 300 others were injured during the demonstration, the release said. Sudanese security forces used live ammunition and tear gas, the release added.

The UN Human Rights Office is calling for an independent and thorough investigation into the allegations of rape and into allegations protesters died due to the use of excessive force by security forces, according to the release.

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**Trump to Hold News Conference on Jan. 6 Anniversary of US Capitol Riot – Statement**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump in a statement on Tuesday announced he will hold a news conference on the first anniversary of the January 6 Capitol riot to discuss what he called the "rigged" 2020 presidential election.

"Why isn't the Unselect Committee of highly partisan political hacks investigating the CAUSE of the January 6th protest, which was the rigged Presidential Election of 2020?," Trump said in a statement. "I will be having a news conference on January 6th at Mar-a-Lago [resort club in Florida] to discuss all of these points, and more. Until then, remember, the insurrection took place on November 3rd, it was the completely unarmed protest of the rigged election that took place on January 6th."

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**US Will Deploy Extra Military Medics, 500Mln Free Rapid Tests to Fight Omicron – Biden**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is rolling out new measures to fight the Omicron coronavirus variant, including deployment of an extra 1,000 troops to COVID-19 hospitals and 500 million free rapid at-home tests, the White House announced on Monday.

"Today, President Biden will announce the following actions," the release said, specifying that the new measures will include "Mobilizing an Additional 1,000 Troops to Deploy to COVID-Burdened Hospitals: The President is directing Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to ready an additional 1,000 service members—military doctors, nurses, paramedics, and other medical personnel—to deploy to hospitals during January and February, as needed."

Biden will also announce the deployment of federal medical personnel, available to states immediately. Six emergency response teams of more than 100 clinical personnel and paramedics are being deployed to the US states of Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, New Hampshire and Vermont.

Moreover, the White House said Biden is ordering the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to activate additional staffing and capacity for the National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) and FEMA regions.

Biden's new measures will also include continued support to states to help hospitals create and license more beds, providing hundreds of ambulances and emergency medical teams.

"Today, the President is announcing that new federal testing sites will be stood up around the country, helping states that need additional testing capacity," the release went on to say. "Today, the President is announcing his Administration will purchase a half-billion at-home, rapid tests this winter to be distributed for free to Americans who want them, with the initial delivery starting in January 2022."

Biden will also announce new steps aimed at vaccinating more people.

"The President will announce that FEMA is standing up new pop-up vaccination clinics across the country," the release said. "Deploying Additional Vaccinators: To further increase capacity, the Biden Administration is deploying hundreds of federal vaccinators across 12 states, tribes and territories."

On Sunday, chief medical adviser Anthony Fauci suggested that hospitals in the United States would face an increased burden due to the spread of the Omicron strain.

The United States is going through another upswing with about 130,000 cases reported daily, which is the highest rate worldwide. A total of 73% of adult Americans are fully vaccinated.

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**US Not Ready to Publicly Discuss Possible Changes in Troop Deployment in Europe -**

Donfried

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will discuss a possibility of changes in troop deployment in Europe with NATO, and is not ready to announce anything yet, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Tuesday. "That will be a conversation that we will have in the NATO context about whether the force posture that we have currently is appropriate for the challenges we are facing," Donfried said. "But I have no announcements today about a changing force posture."

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US Says Ready to Work on Russia's Security Proposal, Despite Some 'Unacceptable' Items  
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to work on some things outlined in Russia's security proposals, but there are other items in them that are unacceptable, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Tuesday. "We are prepared to discuss those proposals that Russia put on the table. There are some things that we're prepared to work on and that we do believe that there's merit in having a discussion in these three formats that I outlined to you," Donfried said. "There are other things in those documents that the Russians know will be unacceptable."

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US Joining Normandy Format on Ukraine Not on Table – Assistant Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The United States is not planning to join the Normandy format, but will continue helping facilitate the implementation of the Minsk agreements and engaging with France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Tuesday. "[T]he United States is open to helping facilitate implementation of the Minsk agreements in support of the Normandy process. So, this is not about the US joining the Normandy process. It's about the US supporting the diplomacy that is already underway and we will continue to engage not only with Ukrainians and Russians on this, but also with the French and the Germans and the OSCE."

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Talks With Russia to Be More Productive in Environment of De-Escalation – US Diplomat



WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The United States believes any talks with Russia will be more productive if they happen in an atmosphere of de-escalation of tensions around Ukraine, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Tuesday.

"We believe talks will be more productive if they happen in an environment of de-escalation instead of escalation.," Donfried told a press briefing.

The United States is continuing to deliver military assistance to Ukraine and the latest delivery took place last week, she added.

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US Believes Bilateral Security Talks With Russia to Take Place in January - Donfried

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Bilateral security talks between the United States and Russia will likely take place in January, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Tuesday.

"[W]e are ready to move out on these multiple channels which I mentioned - bilateral engagement, NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE. On the bilateral engagement, we will decide on a date together with Russia and we believe that that will take place in January," Donfried said during a press briefing.

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US Pledges Extra \$580Mln to Support Multilateral COVID-19 Response, Including WHO

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated an extra \$580 million to support the pandemic response of seven multilateral organizations, including the WHO, UNICEF and FAO, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The United States is providing an additional \$580 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to support seven partners who are working tirelessly in our global fight against COVID-19," Blinken said in a statement.

The secretary recalled that the US has shared more than 330 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to over 110 countries and economies worldwide. The country is also providing \$19.6 billion in health, economic, and humanitarian COVID-19 assistance to other nations.

"This additional \$580 million is a significant contribution to turn vaccines into vaccinations; strengthen public health capacity; support communities in need, and provide urgent, life-saving relief," he added.

The funding includes \$280 million for the World Health Organization (WHO), \$170 million for UNICEF, \$75 million for the Pan American Health Organization, \$20 million for the United

Nations Development Program, \$20 million for the United Nations Population Fund, \$10 million for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and \$5 million for UN Women.